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ABSTRACT

A study examined whether changes in the wording of the cutline would have a significant impact upon readers' responses to the content of a controversial or potentially offensive photograph. Twenty-two variables, including nudity, proximity, and magnitude and innocence were chosen from those concerning editors and readers or those likely to affect responses to photographs. Photographs were then selected to illustrate each variable and two versions of a cutline were written for each photograph. Changes in the cutline wording were designed to alter readers' perceptions of the variable under consideration. The photographs were given to college students who were instructed to arrange them in order, with the photograph they considered to be most offensive on the top. The students also rated each picture's tastefulness, newsworthiness, likability, and powerfulness. Overall, there were no significant differences in the reactions of respondents who received the different cutlines, indicating that readers responded to the photographs themselves and that the photographs' meaning and impact was not significantly altered by the words accompanying them. (FL)

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Changes In The Wording Of Cutlines Fail To Reduce Photographs' Offensiveness

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Changes In The Wording Of Cutlines Fail To Reduce Photographs' Offensiveness

Newspapers are publishing more photographs than ever before, enlarging the photographs and using more color in an effort to attract more readers. But few guidelines are available to help editors decide which photographs are most newsworthy and which photographs are most likely to interest and to please their readers.

Because some newsworthy photographs upset rather than please readers--especially photographs of human grief, humiliation, nudity, violence, injuries and death--editors also need to know more about the methods that might be used to minimize readers' complaints about the publication of those types of photographs.

Previous research has demonstrated the value and popularity of photographs. Schramm and White found that, "Reading of news pictures apparently begins as earl as comics, but increases (instead of falling off as comics do) after 15, reaches peak in middle life and remains relatively high."[1] Swanson found that only 11.3% of the persons who read a newspaper will read a typical news story, but that 51.7 will look at a typical photograph.[2] Similarly, Larkin, Grotta and Stout found th 55% of the newspaper readers 21 to 34 years old, and 42% of the older readers, wa newspapers to publish more photographs.[3]

MacLean and Kao explain that, "A good picture...can tell a lot--fast--and wi a big wallop that the readers won't forget." However, MacLean and Kao also found

that: "We have practically no research on how we can best make or select those 'good' pictures to do such jobs for us. Despite the thousands of readership and audience studies, editors and photographers still have to pretty much fly by the seat of their pants...."[4]

MacLean and Hazard did find clear-cut differences in the preferences of men and women.[5] Photographs' impact and popularity also seem to vary with readers' educational levels, incomes, ages and races. Furthermore: "...certain types of content--animals, people, scenery, and highly topical news items--are well liked and highly read. Pictures of war, destruction, death arouse great intensity and are highly read, but apparently are not well liked by most people."[6]

Previous studies also have reported that editors and readers generally agree on which photographs are most interesting and newsworthy. "Principal exception came on dramatic and gruesome photos. Editors seemed more tolerant of violence, but readership was divided....Generally, readers preferred feature pictures, while editors prefer fresh, hard news photos."[7]

The problem of taste is especially difficult. Newspapers normally do not publish photographs that show frontal nudity, obscene gestures, bloody injuries or the bodies of persons their readers might know. Editors also are critical of photographs that are obviously contrived--that are posed rather than spontaneous. But there are exceptions. While judging photographs, editors seem to apply the rule that, "If it's a big story, and the picture tells it, print it."[8] Thus, some photographs are so obviously newsworthy that editors set aside other considerations such as their popularity and tastefulness, without much debate.

For example: hundreds of editors published the photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald clutching at his stomach after he was shot by Jack Ruby in the basement of a Dallas police station. Photographs taken in Vietnam showed a 73-year-old monk engulfed in flames and the chief of the South Vietnamese National Police firing a

pistol into the brain of a helpless captive.

Newspapers from Boston to Tokyo also published a series of photographs which showed a fireman attempting to rescue a young woman and a 2-year-old child from a Boston fire escape. The woman plunged to her death when the fire escape collapsed, and the publication of those photographs "raised many troubling questions and aroused angry responses from newspaper readers."[9]

Readers accused the newspapers of cheap journalism, voyeurism, insensitivity, irresponsibility, needless sensationalism, an invasion of personal privacy, and a tasteless display of human tragedy to sell newspapers.[10]

Esquire columnist Nora Ephron responded that: "They deserved to be printed because they are great pictures, breathtaking pictures of something that happened. That they disturb readers is exactly as it should be: that's why photojournalism is often more powerful than written journalism." An editor at The Washington Post added that the primary criterion used to judge a photograph of death is "the importance of the news event." Another news executive wagered that, if the woman had survived, there would have been very little reaction. "The picture would not have changed," he explained, "but the fact of death is what reached into the minds and feelings of readers."[11]

A similar debate arose after newspapers published photographs of eight American commandos who died while trying to rescue the 52 hostages from Iran. Readers said photographs of the commandos' charred bodies were distasteful and undignified and that they "did a disservice to the men who died and were cruel in their impact on the families of the dead."

Thus, readers frequently object to photographs of crime, war, destruction, poverty, unhappiness, human suffering and death. Readers are also concerned about the issues of taste, privacy and human grief. Explicit photographs--detailed closeups--seem most likely to arouse their anger. Editors, on the other hand,

are more concerned about photographs' newsworthiness: their powerfulness, significance and effectiveness at telling a story.

The debate raises three questions of interest to photo editors. First, which types of photographs do readers consider most newsworthy? And second, which types of photographs do readers consider most offensive? Previous studies have already begun to examine both questions, but the research seems incomplete. Some variables have not yet been examined. Moreover, previous studies have not considered a third and potentially more important question: If editors can accurately predict that certain newsworthy photographs will offend some of their readers, is there anything they can do to minimize those readers' complaints?

Methodology

The authors isolated 22 variables which have concerned editors and readers or which seemed likely to affect their responses to controversial photographs. The variables included: a photograph's newness, genuineness, proximity and magnitude; a disaster's cause (natural vs. man-made); a victim's age, sex, race and friendliness nudity; the existence and extent of injuries; and the presence or absence of guilt, justification and grief. Also, some persons shown in the photographs were identified more fully than others, and some persons were identified as civilians while others were identified as firemen and soldiers.

Several of the variables were repeated with minor variations. For example: an accident victim might be uninjured or injured, his injuries might be minor or serious, and the victim might survive or die.

One of the authors selected 22 photographs--one to illustrate each of the 22 variables. The two other authors reviewed his selections independently, and they unanimously agreed with all 22 selections. The photographs were intentionally taken from anthologies of memorable and prize-winning pictures so six characteristics frequently associated with news photos could be studied: the photos' tastefulness,

newsworthiness, significance, powerfulness, likability and offensiveness.

Two cutlines were written for each photograph. The second cutline changed a single word or phrase to alter readers' perceptions of the major variable under consideration. For example: the first cutline might report that an accident victim was a man, and the second cutline for the same photograph might report that the victim was a woman. The first cutline for another photograph might report that the victim was injured, and the second cutline might report that the victim was killed: that he lived nearby or far away, that he was a criminal or an innocent victim, that he was a black or a white (See Table I).

Thus, the authors knew the photographs were powerful, for example, but wanted to determine whether changes in the cutlines of powerful photographs would also change the photographs' impact, especially their perceived offensiveness.

Copies of all 22 photographs were placed in envelopes, and the photographs in each envelope were arranged in a different order to eliminate any bias that might be caused by the primacy effect. Also, the photographs in half the envelopes (Group I) were accompanied by the first set of cutlines, and the photographs in the second half (Group 2) were accompanied by the second set of cutlines.

The envelopes were distributed to the students enrolled in two introductory communications classes. Most of the students in both classes were nonmajors. The respondents were asked to arrange the 22 photographs in order, with the photograph they considered most offensive on top, and the photographs they considered progressively less offensive in order beneath it. A questionnaire attached to each photograph asked the respondents to rate its tastefulness, newsworthiness, significance, likability, offensiveness and powerfulness on 6-point scales. The respondents also were asked, "If a newspaper editor received this photograph, should he publish it?"

A separate questionnaire asked respondents their age, sex and college major. Finally, five other questions asked about their normal media usage: where they usually obtain information about what's going on in the world and how often they use newspapers, television, radio and magazines.

All 22 photographs were approximately the same size and were printed in black and white. To add to their realism, the cutlines were set in type and printed along with the photographs, so they resembled actual newspaper clippings. Despite the photographs' controversial content, none of the respondents voiced any complaints about being asked to look at them, either during or after the study.

Three hypotheses were formulated to test the respondents' response to the variables. The hypotheses stated that:

ONE: Changes in the wording of a cutline have a significant impact upon readers' responses to the content of a controversial or potentially offensive photograph.

TWO: Women are more likely to be offended by controversial photographs than men.

THREE: Persons who rarely use the media are more likely to be offended by controversial photographs than persons who use the media more regularly.

Findings and Analysis

A total of 33 respondents evaluated the first group of photographs, and 50 respondents evaluated the second group. Fifty-one of the respondents were men, and 28 were women. The great majority--64--were 25 or younger. Sixteen were journalism majors, and 62 were not. The statistics do not always add up to 83 because some respondents failed to answer all the questions about their age, sex, college major and media usage.

The Mann-Whitney U test shows that the respondents in Group 1 and the respondents in Group 2 reacted differently to the offensiveness of only 4 of the 22 photographs. Two of those photographs showed persons who had apparently been injured. The respondents in Group 1 were told that the victims were "miraculously uninjured" or that "none of their injuries were serious." The respondents in Group 2 were told that the victims had been injured, or that their injuries were serious, and they considered the photographs more offensive.

The third photograph showed a woman plunging to her death from the fifth floor of an Atlanta hotel. The respondents in Group 1 were told that the photograph had been taken recently, and they considered it more offensive than the Group 2 respondents, who were told that the photograph had been taken in 1946. The fourth photograph showed a couple standing on a California beach, and the respondents told that the couple was seeking shelter because of a storm considered it less offensive than respondents who were told that the couple's 19-month-old son had just drowned.

The differences between the respondents in Group 1 and the respondents in Group 2 were significant at the .05 level for all four photographs.

The mean rankings of the remaining photographs were not significantly different. Moreover, neither group consistently ranked the photographs as more or less offensive than did the other group. The first hypothesis consequently fails, since some differences could be expected to occur due to chance alone. The first hypothesis stated that, "Changes in the wording of a cutline have a significant impact upon readers' responses to the content of a controversial or a potentially offensive photograph."

The respondents obviously considered some types of photographs more offensive than others. Because they were alike, the rankings of all 83 respondents were

averaged together, and the mean scores for the 22 photographs ranged from a high of 14.7 to a low of 5.8. The highest possible score was 22, but it would have occurred only if all 83 respondents had considered the same photograph most offensive.

As expected, the respondents considered photographs of human suffering most offensive. Two photographs received scores of 14.7; one showed two accident victims whose clothes were afire, and the second showed New York detectives standing alongside the partially covered body of a hoodlum who had been killed by another hoodlum.

Other photographs considered highly offensive and their mean scores included: an injured person being carried from a fire, 14.4; a man raising his hands in surrender after being shot by the police, 14.1; the covered body of a traffic victim, 13.8; a "living skeleton" freed from a prison camp after World War II, 13.8; the bodies of 300 soldiers outside a prison camp, 13.7; an infant who survived a bombing, 13.6; the bodies of several American soldiers killed in combat, 13.0; a woman kneeling alongside her injured husband following a plane crash, 12.6; and an injured medic caring for a wounded comrade in Vietnam, 11.9.

Three photographs showed persons falling to their deaths, and all three received scores of 11.7 to 11.2. Thus, they ranked 12th, 13th and 14th in offensiveness A frontal shot of a bare-breasted woman ranked 15th and had a mean score of 10.2. By comparison, a photograph showing a bathing beauty--a woman wearing a bikini at a beach--ranked 20th, with a mean score of 7.9.

Surprisingly, two photographs of human grief ranked 19th and 21st, indicating that the respondents considered them relatively inoffensive. One, with a mean score of 8.4, showed a woman clasping her hands to her mouth and standing in front of an apartment building damaged by a tornado. The second, with a mean score of 6.5, showed the couple on a California beach. Group 1 respondents, who were told that the

couple's son had just died, gave the latter photograph a mean score of 8.7, while the respondents in Group 2 gave it a mean score of 4.9. Thus, the photograph's overall score would have risen only slightly if all the respondents had been told about the death, and the photograph would still have been considered far less offensive than the photographs showing visible injuries and death.

The photograph considered least offensive showed a buffalo grazing in a national forest. Respondents in Group 1 were told that the buffalo would be killed by hunters, and respondents in Group 2 were told that it would be killed by rangers to prevent overgrazing in the forest.

Five of the photographs considered highly offensive were also considered distasteful by a majority of the respondents. The photograph considered most distasteful showed the dead hoodlum. Fifty-three respondents said it was in "bad" or "very bad" taste or that it was "more distasteful than not," whereas only 27 respondents said it was in "very good" or "good" taste or was "more tasteful than not." Other photographs and the number of respondents who considered them distasteful included: the covered body of a traffic victim, 51; the woman plunging to her death from a hotel, 49; the woman being carried from a fire, 45; and the bodies of 300 soldiers, 44 (See Table 2).

The photograph of the bare-breasted woman ranked 15th in offensiveness; nevertheless, 47 respondents said it was distasteful.

Conversely, the photographs considered most tasteful and the number of respondents who ranked them in "very good" or "good" taste or "more tasteful than not" included: the buffalo, 76; the bathing beauty, 67; the injured medic treating a wounded comrade, 63; a child digging through some rubble, 62; and heavily-armed British soldiers charging down a street in Belfast, Ireland, 61. Sixty-two respondents also considered both photographs of human grief tasteful: the woman outside the damaged apartment and the couple on a California beach. Even 20 of

the 33 Group 1 respondents who were told the couple's son had just died considered the photograph tasteful.

A majority of the respondents considered all but two of the photographs both newsworthy and powerful. The exceptions for both variables showed the bathing beauty and the couple on a California beach. The photograph of the couple on the beach also was the only one considered "somewhat" or "very" insignificant.

The respondents were more evenly divided on the variables of likability, taste and offensiveness. Nevertheless, 74 respondents said they liked the photograph of the buffalo. Curiously the second and third most likable photographs showed persons who were obviously injured but who were being helped by other persons. Sixty-two respondents liked the photograph of an injured medic helping another soldier, and 61 liked a photograph showing a telephone lineman administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a buddy who had touched a live wire.

Conversely, the photographs considered least likable and the number of respondents who disliked them included: the woman plunging to her death, 55; the dead gangster, 54; the covered body of a traffic victim, 47; the victim being carried from a fire, 44; the 300 dead soldiers, 44; and the bare-breasted woman, 42.

Scores on the 6-point scale also showed that 51 respondents were offended by the photograph showing the 300 bodies outside a prisoner of war camp, 46 were offended by the photograph of the dead gangster, and 43 were offended by the photograph of the woman falling from a hotel.

A majority of the respondents said newspapers should publish 16 of the 22 photographs. Fifty-nine respondents did not want editors to publish the photograph showing the bare-breasted woman, but 21 did. Similarly, the respondents split 58 to 23 against publishing the photograph of the couple on the California

beach, 52 to 29 against publishing the photograph of the dead gangster, 51 to 30 against publishing the photograph of the woman falling from a hotel, and 47 to 33 against publishing the photograph of the bathing beauty. The respondents were about evenly divided (38 to 41) over the photograph showing the covered body of a traffic victim.

As pragmatically expected, almost all the scores were highly correlated with each other. Power, the only exception, was highly correlated with the variables of newsworthiness and significance but appeared to be somewhat different than them, since newsworthiness and significance--but not power--were also highly correlated with the other variables.

The coefficients of correlation between most pairs of the photo variables were significant at p less than .001. When the respondents in Group 1 were considered separately, the coefficients of correlation between the variables of power and taste, power and likability, power and offensiveness, and power and publish/don't publish, were much lower but still significant at p. below .10. The coefficients for respondents in Group 2 were low on three of the variables. One of those three exceptions, the correlation between the variables of power and publish/don't publish, was .37, $p < .001$. The correlation between power and taste for the respondents in Group 2 was not significant.

The most powerful photographs were considered the most publishable, but there were exceptions (Photos 1, 10, 15, 16 and 20). Also, all but two of the photographs (Photos 17 and 20) were rated consistently powerful, significant and newsworthy.

Kendall coefficients show that women considered the photographs significantly less tasteful, less likable and more offensive than did men. The women in Group 1 also tended to consider the photographs less newsworthy. Thus, the data support the second hypothesis, which stated that, "Women are more likely to be offended by controversial photographs than men."

Age was significantly correlated with the variables of significance and power for the respondents in Group 1, but not for the respondents in Group 2. Younger respondents in Group 1 considered the photographs more significant and more powerful.

The respondents' normal usage of the media did not significantly affect their response to any of the photographs. Thus, the data failed to support the third hypothesis, which stated that, "Persons who rarely use the media are more likely to be offended by controversial photographs than persons who use the media more regularly.

Perhaps most obviously, the results confirmed earlier findings that the public is most upset by photographs of violence, injuries and death. However, the results also revealed several additional trends.

The respondents were especially horrified by photographs of fires and fire victims but were relatively tolerant of photographs which showed people falling to their deaths. Photographs of human grief clearly were not as offensive as commonly imagined. Also, respondents generally liked the photographs which showed people helping other people, even when some of the victims had been injured.

It did not matter whether the body of an accident victim was covered or uncovered, nor whether accident victims lived nearby or far away. However, photograp showing accident victims who had been injured or seriously injured seemed more disturbing than photographs showing accident victims who had escaped injured or who had suffered only minor injuries. The respondents also disliked nudity and would not publish cheesecake; however, few said they were offended by the cheesecake.

Because all the respondents were college students, they could not be considered typical newspaper readers. Nevertheless, the fact that they were most disturbed by the types of photographs that also disturbed the respondents in previous studies adds credence to the results.

The fact that the respondents in Groups 1 and 2 reacted in the same way even though they received different cutlines for the 22 photographs suggests that editors cannot easily minimize the public's complaints about the publication of controversial photographs. The photographs seem to have an impact that cannot be altered by alterations in their cutlines.

Nevertheless, readers may be more understanding than is generally imagined. A majority of the respondents in this study considered 20 of the 22 photographs newsworthy, and it seems likely that a great many editors would also reject the two photographs that were not considered newsworthy--photographs showing a woman in a bikini and a couple on a beach. Moreover, a majority of the respondents felt that editors should publish many of the photographs which they considered distasteful unlikable and offensive. However, the respondents were unwilling to publish all the photographs they considered distasteful, unlikable and offensive, apparently because they weighed those considerations more heavily than do newspaper editors.

Summary

The authors isolated 22 variables which have concerned editors and readers or which seemed likely to affect their responses to controversial photographs. One photograph illustrating each variable was shown to 83 respondents; however, the cutline information accompanying those photographs varied from group to group.

Overall, there were no significant differences in the reactions of respondents who received the different cutlines, indicating that readers responded to the photographs themselves, and that the photographs' meaning and impact was not significantly changed by the words accompanying them.

As expected, readers were most disturbed by photographs showing human suffering, death and injuries. Women considered the photographs less tasteful, less likable and more offensive than men. Younger respondents in one group tended to consider the photographs more significant and more powerful than older respondents. However, the respondents' normal media usage did not affect their reactions to the photographs.

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Table 1

Description of Photograph	Variable	Cutline 1	Cutline 2	Comparative Offensiveness
Two men, both afire	Proximity	Two local men	Two Chicago men	1 (Tie)
Murdered criminal	Magnitude	Mob chieftain	Petty thief	1 (Tie)
Person injured in fire	Sex	Man	Woman	3
Suspect shot by police	Innocence	Escaped convict	Innocent motorist	4
Covered body on road	Age	7-year-old	70-year-old	5 (Tie)
Freed WWII prisoner	Identity	U.S. soldier	Jew	5 (Tie)
Bodies of 300 soldiers	Friend/foe	Russian	British	7
Baby survives bombing	Extent of injury	Uninjured	Injured	8
Dead American soldiers	Race	No mention	Black	9
Plane crash victims	Magnitude	Few killed	Many killed	10
Wounded medic, soldier	Extent of injury	Minor	Serious	11
Woman falling to death	Newness	Recent photo	1946 photo	12
Boy falling from plane	Extent of ID	Gives full ID	No name, age	13
Man falling to death	Identity	Hotel guest	Fireman	14
Topless woman	Identity	No name; photo shows face	No name; face is covered	15
Lineman getting aid	Extent of injury	Minor burns	Died	16
Soldiers in Belfast	Reality	Chasing terrorists	Drill	17
Child digs in rubble	Cause	Earthquake	Bombs	18
Survivor of tornado	Magnitude/grief	Physical damage	3 persons died	19
Bathing beauty	Justification	Contest winners	Beauty at beach	20
Couple at beach	Grief	Baby drowned	Caught in storm	21
Grazing buffalo	Cause of death	Hunters	Forestry Service	22

Table 2

Photograph	Tasteful Yes/No	Newsworthy Yes/No	Significant Yes/No	Likable Yes/No	Offensiva Yes/No	Powerful Yes/No	Publish Yes/No
1	30/51	63/18	66/15	34/47	38/43	69/12	38/41
2	36/45	70/11	69/12	36/44	41/40	75/6	48/32
3	42/38	74/7	70/11	48/33	37/44	75/6	47/34
4	43/38	74/7	75/6	48/33	33/48	73/8	53/28
5	40/41	75/5	75/5	43/37	36/44	77/3	56/24
6	53/27	76/5	75/5	53/28	26/54	74/7	54/26
7	60/21	77/4	76/5	61/20	20/61	78/3	57/24
8	37/44	75/6	76/5	37/44	51/29	78/3	49/32
9	63/18	74/7	74/6	62/18	25/55	81/0	64/17
10	34/47	44/37	45/35	39/42	37/44	48/32	21/59
11	47/34	74/6	73/8	49/32	31/50	77/4	63/17
12	40/42	74/7	74/7	42/39	27/43	75/5	52/28
13	51/30	77/4	72/9	46/35	32/49	70/11	59/22
14	62/19	67/13	65/16	52/29	4/77	64/17	57/23
15	27/53	61/20	59/22	27/54	46/35	58/23	29/52
16	32/49	67/14	63/18	26/55	43/38	63/18	30/51
17	62/19	25/56	37/44	42/39	12/69	39/41	23/58
18	61/20	67/14	69/12	57/24	16/65	65/16	57/24
19	51/30	67/14	69/12	51/30	23/58	67/14	55/26
20	67/14	27/54	42/39	56/24	12/69	45/35	33/47
21	62/19	69/12	72/9	55/26	10/71	72/8	58/23
22	76/5	62/19	73/8	74/7	6/74	66/15	58/21

Footnotes

[1]Wilbur Schramm and David M. White, "Age As A Factor In Newspaper Reading," in News Research For Better Newspapers, ed. by Chilton R. Bush (New York: American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation, 1966), p. 43.

[2]Charles E. Swanson, "What They Read in 130 Daily Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, 32 (Fall 1955), p. 415.

[3]Ernest F. Larkin, Gerald L.Grotta and Philip Stout, "The 21-34 Year Old Market And The Daily Newspaper," No. 1, ANPA News Research Report, April 8, 1977, pp. 3-5.

[4]Malcolm S. MacLean and Anne Li-an Kao, "Picture Selection: An Editorial Game," Journalism Quarterly, 40 (Spring 1963), p. 230.

[5]Malcolm S. MacLean and William R. Hazard, "Women's Interest in Pictures: The Badger Village Study," Journalism Quarterly, 30 (Spring 1953), p. 140.

[6]Keith P. Sanders, "Photojournalism Research," in Photojournalism, 2nd ed., by Clifton C. Edom (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1976), pp. 168-169.

[7]Lenora Williamson, "Pictures in the news—What the readers like. What the editors like." Editor & Publisher, Nov. 19, 1977, p. 39.

[8]"Iran news photos raise issue: print or not," Editor & Publisher, May 10, 1980, p. 54.

[9]Nancy Stevens, "Boston Tragedy," News Photographer, October 1975, p. 7.

[10]Lenora Williamson, "Page 1 photos draw reader protests," Editor & Publisher, Aug. 30, 1975, p. 14.

[11]Ibid.